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DE RUEHIT #1750/01 2681302
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5984
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 001750

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/22/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: FAITH, REASON AND ANOTHER WORLD: TURKISH REACTIONS
TO THE POPE

REF: VATICAN 0204

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Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d).

11. (SBU) Summary. Though Pope Benedict XVI's speech delivered at the University of Regensburg on September 12 is fading from Turkey's headlines, the response from Turks is universally negative and the speech continues to be a topic of conversation. A popular view regards the speech as a call for revival of empire once shared by Rome and Constantinople.
End Summary.

THOUGHTS ABOUT AN OFFICIAL RESPONSE

12. (C) On Friday, September 15, we attended a round-table that included former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger under the auspices of the Turkey - US Interparliamentary Friendship Caucus. Kissinger opened with a positive description of Turkey as a "bridge between civilizations," particularly in reference to the ongoing discussions about a clash of civilizations. This led to a discussion of the Pope's speech. Kissinger had not read the speech in its entirety, but did note that he had met Cardinal Ratzinger several years ago and was impressed by his thoughtfulness. He said he could not believe the Pope favors conflict between the Catholic and Muslim worlds. Kissinger's key point was to underscore the importance of not turning this into a religious conflict. Religious conflicts are extremely bloody and have no victors. He said it would be contradictory to have a globalized world in economics and a world otherwise fractured by religion.

13. (C) Also present were key advisors to Prime Minister Erdogan, Cuneyt Zapsu and Egemen Bagis. Zapsu said the central question for an official response to the Pope's comments was, "what do we want to achieve?" He argued that no one wants a clash because it would play into the wrong hands. This must not be blown out of proportion. Quiet, private objections are appropriate but mass reactions are not helpful. Nuri Colakoglu, chairman of Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture Initiative, disagreed with calls to play down the Pope's comments saying these things need to be discussed. Former Secretary Kissinger interjected that he was very troubled by the reaction to the Danish cartoon controversy. Prof Ilten Turan of Bilgi University asked whether a bad reaction to the Pope's November visit such as mass demonstrations, would lead to greater rupture and whether Kissinger would recommend postponing the visit.

Kissinger cautioned that postponement would rebound negatively within the EU, particularly in the Catholic countries.

¶4. (C) As reported reftel, the Turkish DCM at the Vatican confirmed news reports that the Pope's comments will not derail his late November visit to Turkey. Addressing the issue on September 16, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan said, "Pope Benedict spoke like a politician, not like a religious man." Foreign Minister Gul, on the other hand, said the next day that "The Pope's statements were unfortunate," at a time when efforts are already underway to advance the dialogue among religions and cultures. Gul also added publicly that as far as Turkey was concerned, there is no change in the scheduled visit of the Pope.

A MORE CANDID VIEW

¶5. (C) Metin Kulunk, a Turkish businessman and a founding member of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) who has served in a variety of prominent positions within the AKP in Istanbul, including as deputy chairman, shared his thoughts with us. His perspective reflects a current of opinion within conservative Istanbul society. With the Pope's scheduled November visit to Istanbul in mind, Kulunk says Turks reacted strongly to the Pope's remarks, particularly his quotation from 14th century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II. Kulunk did not pick up on the Pope's call to reasoned dialogue among faiths. Instead, he saw the speech as a proposal to revive the old Roman Empire through reconstitution of ties between the "Greek" Patriarchate at Fener in Istanbul and the Vatican. Far from being a spiritual kingdom, Kulunk saw this perceived call for revival in material terms, taking note that the territory up to Vienna is part of a "different" world and not available for reclamation. Kulunk thought little of the use of the 14th century quotation in the Pope's discourse. However, Kulunk elaborated an Ottoman theme and emphasized harmony achieved among the Turks and the "three minorities," Jewish, Armenian

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and Greek, under the Sultans. He inferred peaceful compatibility under the Ottomans came about within an Islamic society.

¶6. (C) Comment. The Pope's planned November trip especially to visit the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul, already viewed with apprehension by Stambulus, now carries additional baggage. Underneath the generally coolheaded public responses reflected in Cuneyt Zapsu's insight four days after the speech, Turks are bitter. At a public gathering of young adults in Istanbul this summer reflecting on foreign policy matters, AKP Branch Chairman Dr. Mehmet Muezzinoglu counseled his listeners to place themselves in the other person's (or country's) shoes and to weigh the issue at hand in light of the other's perspective. Firmly holding truths Jefferson termed "self-evident," cross-cultural dialogue is vital.

JONES